

Career Development Grant – SXSW EDU

Given the increasing political noise around public education, I decided to take a new direction with my career development plan this year. Rather than looking at opportunities to address site-specific needs like I have the past two years (personalized digital content and restorative practices), I felt the need to get a better understanding of the issues, ideas, and debates occurring in education at the national level. This led me to Austin, Texas and SXSW EDU.

Whether it is the Interactive (technology) festival, the music festival, the film festival, or the education conference, the SXSW suite of professional opportunities remains synonymous with innovation and leadership. This is evidenced by the brand's part in launching everything from Twitter to Foursquare, and from Norah Jones to Katy Perry. This reputation spurred me to select the conference, and it did not disappoint. In fact, the greatest challenge once I was there was narrowing down the options and ultimately deciding what to attend. In the end, I decided to choose sessions that would impact our marginalized population.

Two sessions stand out from the first day of the conference. I attended a presentation from Liz Dozier, a former high school principal at Fenger in Chicago, who used "restorative justice, social, and emotional learning, and academic interventions" to build student resiliency, create a positive learning environment, dissuade the school to prison pipeline, and dramatically increase graduation rates. She now advocates for youth rights and voice through Chicago Beyond, a non-profit that invests in ideas, organizations, and leaders "positioned to change the lives of young people." While Chicago is a very different setting than Homer, her use of restorative practices and trauma informed interactions paralleled much of our work in facilitating healing and building resiliency.

Later that first afternoon, I had the opportunity to hear Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida and 2016 Presidential candidate, talk about "Education's Tomorrowland." Governor Bush started the session by discussing the personalization of learning, specifically mentioning Summit Learning. Given our recent work with Ed Elements, I appreciated his comments on the importance of authentic student reflection/ownership and quality digital content. He then discussed his education initiatives in the state of Florida, highlighting the partnerships with businesses and industry. He explained that these partnerships allowed corporations to inform the content encountered by students, and ensured that graduates would possess the skills necessary for future employment.

Day two provided a host of great speakers and workshops, but the morning's highlight was a short session on providing support for children with Adverse Childhood Experiences. This session reinforced our school's focus on building relationships through trauma informed care and restorative practices. They reminded the audience "words matter, and we must ensure all parties are heard" in our buildings, especially given the impact ACEs have on how individuals perceive the world around them. The presenters also discussed the importance of shifting from the mindset of "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"

That afternoon, I heard Leland Melvin speak about individual perseverance and the importance of "being that one person" in our students' lives. Leland highlighted events in his own life, from childhood to the NFL to ultimately joining NASA and working on the International Space Station, and explained

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how specific advocates provided him with the support and encouragement that pushed him to such great heights.

The third day of the conference started with two high-impact interviews back to back. The first, billed as the day's keynote address, included Henry Louis Gates Jr (Harvard Professor) and Paula Kerger (President and CEO of PBS). These two discussed PBS's upcoming documentary *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, highlighting the manner in which society erased the gains African Americans made in the years directly after the war (even ensuring that such content was omitted from subsequent school curriculums) and drawing parallels with the events of today.

The second session, an interview of David Hogg (*March For Our Lives*) by Dan Rather, examined the manner in which young people today can affect change in the present political climate. David underscored the importance of authentic student voice and advocacy, both at the national and local level, in issues ranging from gun violence to climate change.

That afternoon's highlight was a short talk on empowering students to manage chronic stress. The session, focused on some of the marginalized populations we serve, reinforced much of what we do at our school, including restorative practices, trauma informed care, the destigmatization of basic resources (food bags, access to showers and laundry facilities, etc.), and the promotion of a culture of caring and kindness. But it also underscored the importance of educator self-care, an increasing need we are recognizing in our school and community partners.

The final day of the conference again presented a dizzying amount of quality sessions, a highlight being the keynote by Jennifer Gonzalez, a former teacher and now director of the *Cult of Pedagogy*. In her presentation, Jennifer equated the forces affecting school progress to aerodynamics and the forces that impact flight. It is the management of these forces that dictate the success of our initiatives and ultimately the success of our schools.

Another standout presentation, and a great way to wrap up the conference, was a session by Instituto Peninsula, a Brazilian nonprofit focusing on changing teacher education. This talk highlighted the importance of community engagement and partnerships in the classroom as well as collective decision making. Most importantly, it talked about the necessity of developing more than educators' minds. Rather, it argued that job effectiveness and longevity necessitate that educators take time to practice listening, collaboration (i.e. study groups), and weekly self-care.

SXSW EDU reinforced many of the practices we are working to implement in our school, including restorative practices, trauma informed care, and community engagement. But the conference also underscored the importance of staff social/emotional well-being. Secondary trauma, and its impact on the lives of the adults in the building, has a direct impact on the success of the school as a whole. Perhaps one of next year's school goals at our site will focus on educator self-care and revitalization.

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